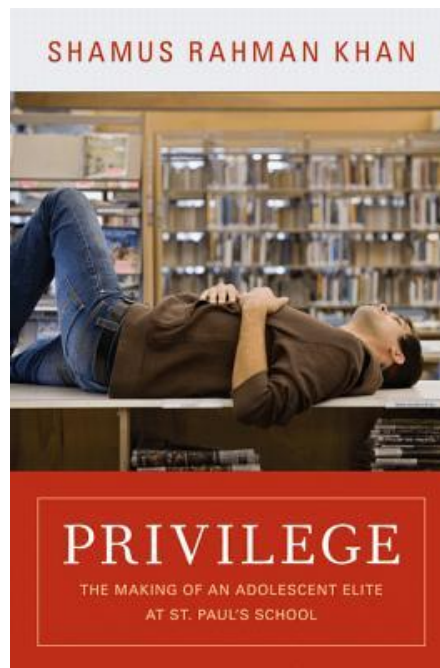




Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School

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As one of the most prestigious high schools in the nation, St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, has long been the exclusive domain of America's wealthiest sons. But times have changed. Today, a new elite of boys and girls is being molded at St. Paul's, one that reflects the hope of openness but also the persistence of inequality.

In *Privilege*, Shamus Khan returns to his alma mater to provide an inside look at an institution that has been the private realm of the elite for the past 150 years. He shows that St. Paul's students continue to learn what they always have--how to embody privilege. Yet, while students once leveraged the trappings of upper-class entitlement, family connections, and high culture, current St. Paul's students learn to succeed in a more diverse environment. To be the future leaders of a more democratic world, they must be at ease with everything from highbrow art to everyday life--from *Beowulf* to *Jaws*--and view hierarchies as ladders to scale. Through deft portrayals of the relationships among students, faculty, and staff, Khan shows how members of the new elite face the opening of society while still preserving the advantages that allow them to rule.

Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School Details

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Lizzie says

I was tempted into this book by a youtube clip from an interview with the author. That clip hit the highlights of this book: namely, that elite secondary schools continue to reproduce the privilege of wealthy elites but they do so while also perpetuating a narrative in which rich kids succeed because they are talented, gifted, hard workers, ect. and not because they are rich.

Some of Khan's narrative passages early on have a captain of the obvious feel- yes, schools (like other institutions) socialize their members by diminishing the importance of previous identities and pressing upon members a new sense of who they are and how they relate to other actors in the new environment. So yes, we see the "newbs" at St. Paul's experimenting with dress, musical tastes, and speech until they find paths for success in this new structure. Duh.

Far more interesting was Khan's ability to unpack a seeming contradiction: American wealth has become more concentrated in the hands of elites (the infamous 1%) at the same time that civil rights movements have borne fruit in greater diversity (although nothing close to parity) in American educational institutions. I like Khan's conception of democratic inequality, in which a certain amount of diversity, combined with a narrative of meritocracy, creates the illusion of an open society while obscuring systems of oppression that continue to produce structural inequality in American society. Khan highlights that while students in elite schools may work hard (although there is no guarantee that they do) and demonstrate ease within a variety of academic and cultural situations (although that ease may mask lack of knowledge or superficial thinking), these students tend to be relatively average in their native talent. Yet the narrative of families, schools, teachers, and peers encourages the perception that the fruit of their labors (Ivy League school, high paying job) is the result of sheer native talent and hard work vice accumulated social capital (and a high school that spends \$80k per student!!!). The corollary to this argument is that working class people are not a class per se (operating within political, economic, and social constraints) but rather people who have failed to work hard and who have closed themselves off to the pick-and-choose variety that defines elite cultural values.

Khan's other intriguing point is that social capital is not knowledge/goods, as commonly envisioned, but rather physical and social practices that must be embodied, performed, and accepted by the given audience: "So the analogy of cultural capital as 'money in your wallet' is somewhat misleading. Instead, I most often thought of culture in a relation way. My observations guided me to think of culture as a practice, not a possession." In Khan's analysis, elite schools reproduce privilege by taking children of elites and instructing them how to embody the attitudes and practices of the elite (to be at "ease" in a wide spectrum of situations and to be comfortable relating to authority figures and playing by the rules to ascend hierarchical structures). Students of color and women students have a more contentious relationship to the hierarchy- as they are visibly and inescapably different from the norm they must be more self-conscious and deliberate about how they relate to others. This self-consciousness interrupts their embodiment of elite status (ie "ease") and can prompt these students to swallow the elite school narrative of unalloyed meritocracy with more than a few grains of salt. Interestingly, Khan argues that class background does not have this effect- class can effectively be laundered through the gradual embodiment of elite practices whereas race and gender are less fluid categories. The presence of non-traditional students at these schools perversely reinforces elite students' self-perception as high-achievers (although when race or gender pops up to make systematic oppressive hierarchies visible, as in the case of the black teachers sitting at the very back of the room, elites feel great discomfort).

Worth the read and certainly there was more than a few moments of wry self-recognition for me, although

my high school was a far cry from St. Paul's. If privilege is the ability to *not* think, to *not* worry, to *not* have to compensate for how others will perceive you, then elite schools surely foster the privilege of elites who are told they succeed because they work hard, compete in a fair system, and win based on native talent. Khan argues that these schools reproduce elite status while hiding the mechanics of structural oppression behind a curtain, never challenging students to evaluate the nature of their relative success and prosperity.

Elizabeth says

I liked this book more than I thought I would. I bought it because I took a seminar by the author where he talked about the culture of elites in relation to *The Great Gatsby*. He studies the rich in the US in order to better understand inequality "because they are the ones who control most of the money." In *Privilege* he studies students at one of the most elite high schools in the country. These students believe they work harder than others and that is why they get into the best colleges. But this is not the case. The students do work hard but it is the exposure they get to so many different experiences and the confidence that comes with this cultural knowledge that sets them apart. The ability to be comfortable in any social situation is what they learn in school.

Lizzie says

Recommended by Dan for at least the second time at dinner tonight.

Michael says

This was an extremely thoughtful and entertaining ethnography. It was really interesting to see Khan study an institution that was so formative in his own education. His insights made me reconsider a lot of the similar dynamics that I experienced in my high school years at Andover and will make me think more critically of the social dynamics around me in college.

One of the most interesting observations that Khan makes is that the pedagogical method of choice at St. Paul's (as is the case with Columbia's Core Curriculum) privileges breadth and making connections across works, cultures, and time periods. This organizing principle understandably devalues the particularistic and domain specific knowledge- a fact of which Khan seems to be keenly aware. In his own work though, the attention to place and the specific narratives and his careful and insightful (but not over reaching) generalizations seem to demonstrate a more humble and epistemology, one that would be helpful for today's "young elite" to aspire to.

Kathrina says

A rough start, but the second half made some interesting points, mostly that the 21st century new elite are omnivorous cultural consumers that are trained not particularly to know more but to know differently, taught to synthesize and connect rather than absorb and remember. Rather than learning 'secret' or exclusive knowledge about how to be, they embody their privilege through an extended period of practice.

Maynard Handley says

The product of a very confused author...

Some future Nietzsche is going to write a history of our time called "The Genealogy of Morons", in which (s)he discusses how slave mentality slowly took over our discourse, so that we slipped from being angry that only the rich could be educated to being angry that the educated were rich.

This book is an example of a general inchoate anger we're seeing that insists on confusing a (totally justified) anger at the rich and the dominant political class, with anger at the hard work and intelligence that allows outsiders to succeed. It's not longer enough to be angry that Senator Snootington III's son will have an easy path through life, we now have to complain that spending time on homework, or cultivating self-control, are unfair ways of gaining an advantage in life. Every idiocy you thought you'd seen the last of when the unsold copies of *The Greening of America* were pulped is back with us.

So for this author, the complaint against a boarding school is not that it costs too much but that it is "unnatural", as is the complaint against much of the teaching. At no time is it ever considered that, perhaps, the natural state of man over-rated -- this is an author firmly on the side of Rousseau rather than Hobbes, though determinedly uninterested in the life of the actual Rousseau, or how his vague fantasies and ungrounded claims played out in history.

There's scope for sensible things to be written about privilege in America, both that based on wealth and that based on education+intelligence. There's scope for considering how society should educate those who are not in the top 10% of intelligence, or how to cap the rewards accruing to those who are most blessed. But none of this is achieved by complaining that genuine education is "unfair", and that creating an environment in which such education can flourish is "unnatural".

A far better book would, for example, have compared St Paul's to a few other schools that demand excellence from their students, but are not synonymous with wealth, for example perhaps Bronx High School of Science and some of the KIPP academies, along with, perhaps, some different types of schools (eg military academies) that are likewise boarding facilities but synonymous with neither wealth nor a focus on academic excellence. Too much of what is claimed here is based on a sample of one, fed into a pre-existing (not very sophisticated) theoretical framework.

Flora says

Privilege gets at a lot of important and interesting issues without being dense, jargon-y, or extremely academic. A quick read that you can feel smart while reading.

Tommy says

Shamus Rahman Khan returns to St Paul's boarding school (his alma mater) in Concord, NH to explore how boarding schools are creating the elite of tomorrow. I particularly enjoyed how Khan focused on how what it means to be elite has changed over time. Whereas in the past there used to be specific cultural knowledge of

high arts and culture which used to be used as a cultural barrier but with the increased openness in the digital age it is essentially impossible to restrict access to information so the new barriers are centered around ease and fluency in all aspects of culture (from high culture to pop culture) and a way of being. Khan makes an interesting point that while this is a more open/democratic world the barriers to entry are no less real and actually more difficult to fight because it is easier for people to justify inequality as a result of "hard work".

A little dry and surface level but an interesting look nonetheless.

Nathan says

Privilege illustrates how those who already have the most make sure their children have even more through access to institutions like St. Paul's School, reproducing inequality and class division in American society in new, more transparent, and supposedly more 'democratic' forms. With economic inequality dramatically on the rise since the 1970s, and with educational credentials playing an ever more important role in gaining access to the most lucrative and rewarding forms of work and compensation, Privilege is a reminder of the continued conversation at a time that such a spark is a much needed discussion of the intersection of wealth, inequality and education.

Having been assigned this book in conjunction with Bourdieu's work, does raise several questions regarding what Khan was attempting to do with his many anecdotal and observational narratives. There are dozens of moments throughout the book where the reader simply wishes Khan to provide more detail and not rely so heavily on his interviews as proven fact; however, the idea of ethnographic studies makes this a bit more understandable.

Overall, the work feels a bit incomplete, but still worth the read for a basic level of "behind the scenes" knowledge of a world for which I have little to no context.

Rachel Bayles says

This is an enjoyable book, but you really have to be interested in the topic. It helps paint a fairly detailed picture about why private school is so different, and why it helps create and/or perpetuate habits and attitudes. Sometimes the author goes a bit too far (or maybe not far enough), but in general its a useful piece of work. I look forward to seeing what he writes next.

Jill Crosby says

Not a lot of new info here, though Khan's meticulously recorded case studies help illustrate the concept that elitism is alive and evolving in ways to preserve itself in a more diverse society.

Marta says

This book explained so much of what I have observed but not understood. Highly recommend.

Dana says

Accessible and fascinating. If you are familiar with sociological work on class (Bourdieu/habitus/etc) probably nothing too new but applies them in an engaging way. I loved the concept of "ease" and it helped me make sense of so much of what I've seen at elite schools. Good read for any student entering a privileged university and hoping to make sense of the culture.

I wish he had expanded more on his point about the expansive curriculum and its relation to privilege. Not sure I agree it is necessarily a causal relationship---what about other schools w/ that kind of sweeping curriculum? Wonder how it works in other contexts. Really interesting nonetheless.

Gillian says

Some parts of the book were well-researched, others were not and their absence was glaringly obvious in the conclusions the author arrived at. He bases too much of his arguments on his personal experiences as an adolescent at the school and his observations from 1 year working there as a teacher. While some of his points are well-founded and defended, as well as being insightful, many were weak and wouldn't hold water in a more academic setting. While the book aims to be serious social science, it is ultimately pop sociology for general consumption.

Todd baron says

Working at an elite school, this is fascinating. Especially in light of the class structure any elite schools pretend doesn't exist.
